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INCIDENT  
IN THE  
War of the United States with Mexico,  
ILLUSTRATING THE  
SERVICES OF WM. MAXWELL WOOD, SURGEON U. S. N.  
*IN EFFECTING THE ACQUISITION OF CALIFORNIA.*

By GEO. CUMMING McWHORTER, Esq.  
READ BEFORE THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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# Incident in the War of the United States with Mexico.

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It often happens in the history of nations, that issues of vast importance turn upon some circumstances with which the public are hardly, if at all acquainted. It follows, that the immediate cause of the great result, and the conduct of those who may have been engaged in producing it, remain unappreciated, though the end of the transaction and its consequences are apparent to all who think upon the subject. An incident illustrative of the above assertion took place at the very beginning of our war with Mexico, which, as it has come to our knowledge from reliable sources, we purpose to describe, having no other interest or design than to play the honest chronicler, and to keep the matter, which should be known, from being lost in that oblivion in which time is burying so many interesting events of the past.

Our readers will remember, that prior to the annexation of Texas by our country, Great Britain made a demonstration to obtain possession of that territory, and thus to acquire another foothold upon the continent of North America. We need not relate the history. She was defeated in her object by the action of the United States in annexing Texas, which the American Government regarded as a separate power, having previously recognized her independence. Doubtless our movement was precipitated by the rumors which were rife in regard to the purposes of England to avail herself of the distressed state of Texan affairs, in order to gain her point.

However that may have been, the annexation of Texas brought the United States to the Rio Grande, and opened the door to collisions between our troops and those of Mexico, and the invasion of our territory by the latter, which caused Congress to declare that war

existed between the United States and Mexico. Among the no less solid than brilliant advantages that ensued to our country from that conflict, was the acquisition of the present State of California. How we obtained, and how near we came to losing the prize, are matters which turned upon the incident we are about to relate.

Prior to the war, during the administration of Mr Polk, the Mexican Government was indebted in a considerable sum to Englishmen who had invested in American securities. The payment of those securities, owing to the disturbed state of Mexican affairs, which had got to be chronic, and the disordered state of the finances of that nation, seemed to be growing every day more and more doubtful, so that the English holders of Mexican bonds became alarmed. In this position of things they appealed to their own Government to undertake their cause and protect them from loss. Great Britain, ever ready to charge herself with the interests of her citizens who may consider themselves aggrieved by, or likely to suffer harm or loss through foreign powers—for which she is to be admired—and ever looking with a covetous eye upon American territory, and, as in the case of Texas referred to, without fear of the Monroe doctrine—which asserts that the United States will not permit a European power to acquire further territory upon this continent—proposed to the Government of Mexico that it should mortgage California to Great Britain as a security for the bonds which we have said were held by Englishmen. Further, she proposed that Mexico should put her in actual possession of the territory mortgaged. England would thus be mistress of the position. She could assume the payment of the bonds, release Mexico, convert the mortgage into a fee-simple, and so become owner of California upon the most advantageous terms. Besides, having effected such a lodgment upon the Southwest Pacific, with her Canadian and Island possessions, she would surround the United States, and be in a position to prevent the Republic, whose increasing power awakened her jealousy, from spreading over the continent—in fact she could hold us in check. The scheme was a clever one, and had it succeeded, would have indemnified the English for their disappointment in regard to Louisiana in 1815, and to Texas in 1845. Moreover, it can hardly be doubted, that if Great Britain had obtained possession of California, she would have found in Mexi-

co's infirmity her opportunity, and introduced her India policy, and treated Mexican authorities as she had done Indian Princes and Begums. First, she would have extended a protectorate over the disorganized nation; second, as that would have involved the expenditure of much money, to reimburse herself she would have converted the protectorate, first, into a qualified, and then into an actual sovereignty, just as she had converted the mortgage of California into a fee-simple. In addition, too, when the war of the Southern Rebellion broke out, she would have been greatly facilitated in aiding the Confederate Government in its endeavor to rend our Nation, and produce that "Disruption of the United States" which the English author, Freeman, (in common with so many of his countrymen,) hoped existed when he inscribed those words as part of the title to his "History of Federate Government," which is to run from the days of Athens to the time of said "disruption." Probably, Freeman, like Buhle, will not live to finish his work. Who knows, too, had England got possession of Mexico, and the United States been divided, but that she might have absorbed the Confederate States, and made herself partial mistress of North America. Perhaps the wars of the Revolution, and of 1812, would have had to be refought. It is easy to see what tremendous issues turned upon the negotiation for California, under cover of the Mexican bonds due to English subjects.

While the negotiation was going on, delayed by Mexican pride no doubt, for the Mexicans, incensed at the annexation of Texas by our Government, though they could not pay their bonds, were extremely unwilling to part with any of their territory—the important event which killed the whole proceeding, and estopped Great Britain, took place.

Previously, we believe about the year 1842, Commodore Ap. Catesby Jones, acting upon his own suggestion, made a descent upon Mexican Pacific territory. We think that he occupied Monterey, and through it took possession of California for his Government. The United States did not sustain Commodore Jones in his over-zealous and premature effort to extend our domain on the Pacific, and so the Commodore retired, and the movement came to nothing. It had two effects however; it stimulated Great Britain to enter upon her negotiation, and it irritated Mexico, and made her more tenacious than ever of her soil already curtailed by the going off of Texas.

While affairs were in the position we have related, in the winter of 1846, the United States fleet, consisting of the Savannah, Cyane, Levant and other ships, under command of Commodore Sloat in the first, was at Mazatlan, a port on the Pacific just within the tropic. The British fleet, under Admiral Seymour in the Collingwood, was at the same place. The Admiral had ample arrangements by which he could receive early information from every quarter, and devoted himself especially to observing our ships. He was, if possible, more keenly alive to the importance of the situation, and the critical state of affairs, than was either the United States or Mexico. Just then a report was circulated in Mazatlan, that war had broken out between the latter countries; but as it was merely a rumor which might have grown out of nervousness or some trifle magnified, and as the British Admiral, notwithstanding his arrangements to obtain early information, had not received any such news from any reliable source, the report was not credited by any, and all was quiet on the Pacific.

Dr. William Maxwell Wood was then Fleet Surgeon of the United States Squadron. This officer having obtained permission to return home, Commodore Sloat entrusted him with written dispatches and private advices which it was thought best not to commit to paper.\* The Doctor took the route through Mexico, accompanied by Mr. Parrott, United States Consul at Mazatlan, who was also on his way home.

When the party arrived at Guadalajara, the town was in a state of agitation arising from rumors of war. Fortunately, Dr. Wood was well acquainted with the Spanish language. Very soon he gathered from conversations in his proximity, not intended for his ear, that a collision between the United States and Mexican forces had taken place along the Rio Grande. The Mexican papers gave exaggerated accounts of what had occurred. The feelings of the people were excited. There was no time for reflection in an emergency requiring instant action. The Doctor was a peculiarly cool and sagacious man, and of unflinching courage. Immediately he grasped the occasion, and decided upon the course for him to pursue, and with quietness and calmness he carried his decision into effect. He wrote a dispatch recounting the intelligence he had received,

\*Sec A.—Appendix.

and sent it under cover from Consul Parrott to Commodore Sloat. The courier rode full speed, night and day, and delivered the dispatch to Sloat, at Mazatlan, at the earliest practicable moment. The Commodore, as soon as he received the important and exciting information, perceiving the exigency of the case, acted with admirable decision and promptitude. He ordered the *Cyane* and *Levant* to sail directly for Monterey, and followed very soon after in the *Savannah*. As soon as he arrived at Monterey, July 7th, 1846, he occupied the town, hoisted the American flag, and took formal possession of Monterey, San Francisco, and others of the Californias in behalf of his Government. The possession so taken was never relinquished, except in regard to Lower California, a territory of little value. A few days after the departure of the United States Squadron from Mazatlan, Admiral Seymour received similar advices to those which Dr. Wood had so rapidly forwarded to Sloat. The Admiral instantly fathomed the intentions of the Commodore, and without delay sailed on the same errand, hoping to outsail the American ship. But the *Savannah* was a fast vessel, and being driven to the utmost, the Admiral did not succeed in overtaking her. When he reached Monterey he found the American flag flying on the soil, and California formally and actually in possession of our country and safe from English designs. It will be readily conceived that he was deeply chagrined at being outdone, notwithstanding his arrangements for early information, by American sagacity, promptitude and pluck, and in seeing Her Majesty's Government thwarted in its well devised and long cherished scheme of territorial aggrandizement—one, too, which, had it been successful, might have changed the political face of this continent. However, he stomached the affair with the best grace of which he was master, and no trouble arose between the Americans and British on the Pacific; the latter recognizing that the former had acted legally, and as they would do under similar circumstances themselves.

To return to Dr. Wood. The Doctor and his friends continued their journey to the City of Mexico. There the news of the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma was rife in the streets, and open war having thus broken out between the two countries, the public excitement was greater even than it had been at Guadalajara.

The position of the American officer became extremely critical, and was fraught with danger. A foreigner in the midst of a hostile nation, surrounded by an embittered people, charged with dispatches to the enemy's Government, having availed himself of the opportunity furnished by his journey to gather secret and vital information and transmit the same to the American Commodore on the Pacific, he was liable to arrest at any moment. Had his operations been discovered he would have been seized, and would hardly have escaped with his life. Nevertheless he exhibited no trepidation, and pursued his fixed purpose of rendering all the service in his power without staying to weigh the personal hazard. By good fortune he met in the City of Mexico an official whom he had known formerly, and who, though he understood the Doctor's delicate position, manifested himself throughout his stay in the city as his friend. This gentleman was intimate with Senor Tornel, the Minister at War, and thus became the recipient of the secret affairs of Mexico and its earliest advices from the seat of war. An American by birth and disaffected to the Government, he communicated gladly all that he knew to Dr. Wood. The information so acquired up to the latest moment, the Doctor sent *via* the Mexican mail to a neutral German friend at Vera Cruz, adding a full account of his journey and what he had done, together with his position at the time of his writing, in order that, in case of his discovery, arrest or murder, the United States might derive through the German neutral all the advantages consequent upon the possession of such important information.

This precaution taken, the Doctor proceeded quietly to Vera Cruz. Arrived there he found that the United States Blockading Fleet was lying off the harbor. But how was he, an American, to reach it and advise the Commodore of the state of affairs, and obtain transportation home in order to deliver the dispatches, both written and verbal, of which he was the bearer, and put his Government in possession of his operations and the consequences which he reasonably inferred had ensued therefrom upon the Pacific—all which it was most important that the President should know without delay?

But fortune favors the brave, and the Doctor succeeded in escaping from his unpleasant predicament, by enlisting the sympathies



of the Captain of a neutral ship of war. The latter sent him off in one of his boats which was going out on some business to the American fleet. It will be easily imagined how much delighted Dr. Wood was, when he found himself, after passing through so many trials and dangers, safe upon the deck of an American ship, and under the protection of the stars and stripes. Ossian says, that "the recollection of joys that are past, is pleasant and mournful to the soul." The *olim meminisse juvabit* of the Latin poet teaches with equal truth, that the memory of trials endured in a good cause, kindle a joy in the soul. If the Doctor remembered his school-boy Latin, certainly the words of the Roman recurred to his mind, when, with a sense of noble triumph he stepped upon the quarter-deck of the flag-ship of the Blockading Squadron.

His whole task, however, was not yet accomplished. He must go on to the seat of Government to finish his *devoir*. To enable him to do this he informed the Commodore that he was bearer of dispatches to the Secretary of the Navy, and narrated briefly the incidents of his journey. The Commodore comprehended the case at a glance, and instantly detached an armed steamer and sent her with Dr Wood to the United States, directing all speed to be made. Arrived on our shore the Doctor made his way as quickly as possible to Washington, where he handed his dispatches to Mr. Bancroft, Secretary of the Navy, and unbosomed himself not only with respect to the secret advices with which he had been charged by his Commanding Officer, but likewise in regard to his eventful journey through the enemy's territory, the course he had taken to advise Commodore Sloat of the rupture between the United States and Mexico, and the probable action of the Commodore in consequence thereof.

Mr Bancroft was highly gratified by the conduct of Dr. Wood in the trying circumstances in which he had been placed, and complimented him highly upon the courage and ability he had displayed in protecting and advancing the interests of his country. Subsequently, Commodore Sloat addressed him a very commendatory letter, acknowledging the great value of the services he had rendered "at the risk of his life."\* Mr. Mallory, too, Chairman of the Com-

\*See B.—Appendix.

mittee in the United States Senate on Naval affairs, wrote Dr. Wood afterwards, saying, among other things: "Every intelligent mind must at once appreciate the importance of the service you have rendered the country, and your personal hazard in traveling through the heart of the enemy's country, communicating with your military superior, and furnishing him with the sole, and otherwise unattainable information upon which he based the acquisition of California. The importance of this acquisition can best be estimated by asking ourselves what would have been our National position on the Pacific, and upon our Oregon frontier, had Great Britain, instead of ourselves, acquired permanent possession of it. I have always contended that its acquisition constitutes one of the Navy's strongest claims upon the gratitude and fostering hand of the Nation, and this chapter in your own history, furnished by your own service, but strengthened the conviction."

Congress, we believe, never made any National recognition of the transaction, the Government never conferred upon the Doctor any mark of distinction for the great service he rendered, and the immediate cause and mode of the acquisition of California, seems likely to be buried in oblivion.

The only allusion ever made publicly to the matter, we apprehend, was by a writer in a California journal, who, after the war, and when California had attained importance in the eyes of the world, published a eulogy of Dr. Wood. Although to have borne so important a part in gaining from Mexico, in the face of the designs of England, the territory which constitutes our great Pacific State, which has yielded more than one thousand millions of gold to the world, and owning the chief port on the Western coast, forms the key of the Pacific, deserves a eulogy, we write only as a chronicler, for we do not even know the brave Surgeon whom both the nation and the navy, in the opinion of Mr. Mallory, owe so much gratitude.

Dr. Wood, in course of time, became Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in the Department at Washington. We believe that he is now a retired officer, living in the enjoyment of the recollections of the past.

The splendors which illumined the respective terminations of the

wars of 1812 and 1846 possess a noteworthy harmony in one particular. When Great Britain made peace with this country, it was stipulated that each nation should hold whatever territory might be in actual possession of each at the time of the proclamation of peace, February 18th, 1815, should be made, irrespective of any previous national proprietorship. Great Britain believed that Packenham would have captured New Orleans before that time, and that she would be the owner of the mouth of the Mississippi and the adjacent territory, in fact, of Louisiana, and thus could confine the United States and control the commerce of the Southwest. But British arms did not sustain British diplomacy. Jackson quite changed the result. The war of 1812, which England fondly imagined was to be terminated in a peace most advantageous to her, by the acquisition of such vitally important territory, and consequently most humiliating to her opponent, through the crowning victory on the 8th of January, at New Orleans, closed in mortification and disappointment to England, and in a blaze of glory to the United States.

The war with Mexico was admirably conducted, and the victories won reflected great lustre upon the American arms. But, if in the course of the struggle, Great Britain had carried off California, however glorious might have been the successes of our troops, the conclusion would have proved, politically, most unfortunate. As it was, with California to add another star to our azure field, and Great Britain estopped from tithing or tolling further on this continent, the conclusion was, in every respect, most triumphant.

In each instance, in each emergency, the issue turned upon the courage and capacity of one man. Both should be remembered. Happy the nation which "never wants a *man* to stand before the Lord" for her in every crisis of her history.

## APPENDIX.

[A]

*Extract from a dispatch from Com. J. D. Sloat, Commanding U. S. Pacific Squadron, addressed to the Hon. George Bancroft, Secretary of the Navy, and dated*

"FLAG-SHIP SAVANNAH,

No. 47.

MAZATLAN, April 30th, 1846.

"SIR: I forward this by Dr. Wm. M. Wood, to whom I have given permission to return to the United States, at his own request. He came out as Fleet Surgeon of this Squadron, and some time since was superseded by Dr. Chase. Dr. Wood is a gentleman of observation and intelligence, speaks and reads the Spanish language, and will, in passing across the country, undoubtedly acquire very valuable information for the Government; and I refer the Department to him for information I have communicated to him verbally, which I did not think safe to trust in my letters across the country.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obt. servant,

(Signed)

JOHN D. SLOAT."

[B]

*Letter of Commodore Sloat.*

NEW YORK, 20th March, 1855.

"MY DEAR SIR: I received your favor of the 14th inst. this morning. I am most happy to acknowledge the very important services you rendered the Government and the Squadron in the Pacific under my command, at the breaking out of the war with Mexico. The information you furnished me at Mazatlan from Guad-alaxara, (at the risk of your life,) was the only reliable information I received of that event, and which induced me to proceed immediately to California, and upon my own responsibility to take possession of that country, which I did on the 7th of July, 1846.

"I have always considered the performance of your journey through Mexico at that time, as an extraordinary feat, requiring great courage, presence of mind and address. How you escaped from the heart of an enemy's country, and such a people, has always been a wonder to me, and has been so characterized by me upon all occasions.

Very truly your friend,

(Signed)

JOHN D. SLOAT."

DR. WM. MAXWELL WOOD, U. S. Navy."